

Visiting a Synagogue

Before Your Visit

Synagogue is a Greek word meaning **leading together**. A synagogue is a building for the Jewish community to use together. There are several words that Jews may use instead of synagogue:

Shul is a Yiddish word meaning **school**;

Bet HaMidrash is a Hebrew name meaning **House of Study**;

Most Jewish communities use their synagogue as a place where adults and children can learn more about Judaism. There will usually be a religion school for children on a Sunday morning. The religion school is often called **cheder** (Yiddish for **room**) and adults may meet to study Torah or to learn about other aspects of Jewish knowledge.

Bet HaTefillah is Hebrew for **House of Prayer**;

The synagogue is where Jews meet on Sabbaths and festivals to pray to God. In some synagogues there will be a special room, which is only used for prayer services. In others the same room will be used for prayer and other activities.

Bet HaKnesset means **House of Gathering**.

Jewish communities use their synagogues for all sorts of non-religious activities. They may use the synagogue for meetings, discussion groups, celebrations, youth clubs and many other activities.

Features of a Synagogue

Every synagogue has 3 special features:

At the front of the synagogue's main room there will be a special cupboard where the Torah scrolls are kept. This is called the **ark** or **aron ha-kodesh**. There may be curtains in front of the ark. The ark is always at the eastern end of the synagogue, because that is the direction towards Jerusalem, where the temple used to be.

Near the ark there will be a lamp that is kept alight all the time. This is called the **ner tamid**, which means **everlasting light**. It is to remind people that God is always there.

The **bimah** is a raised platform where the Torah scrolls are opened and read out. The bimah may be in the middle of the synagogue or it may be right next to the Ark.

Name.....

Date

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At the Synagogue

1. Which synagogue are you visiting? _____

2. What is the name of the community? _____

3. Make a quick (bird's eye view) sketch map of the room where services are held. Show the ark, the bimah and the ner tamid. Show which way is east. Is the bimah near the ark or is it in the middle of the room? Which way do the rows of seats face?



4. What are the decorations like? Are there pictures? Do they show people, such as famous characters from Bible stories? _____

5. Is the room used only for prayer services? How can you tell? _____

6. Do men and women sit together or separately? _____

7. Does the synagogue have a motto or slogan written on the ark or near it? If so, can you find out what it means? (It will probably be written in Hebrew). _____

8. Does the synagogue have a cheder? _____ What other studying takes place there? _____

9. Can you find any other evidence that the synagogue is used for study? _____

10. What evidence can you find that the synagogue is used for other activities that are not connected with prayer or Jewish study? _____

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Teachers' Notes

Pronunciations:

Shul : To rhyme with school

Ner Tamid : Ner to rhyme with air.

Cheder : ch as in loch.

Aron hakodesh : ah-ron huh-ko-desh

Bet hamidrash : bet huh-midrush,

Bet hatefillah : bet huh-te'fillah,

Bet haknesset : bet huh-k'nesset

Bimah : bee-muh

At the Synagogue:

1. Names:

Most Jewish communities choose a name for themselves. American communities often use their name as the name of their synagogue. In the UK it is more common for the synagogue to be called after its location. For instance a community might call itself **Kehillah Chaim** (Community of Life) or **Kehillah Bet Miglat** (Community of the House of Refuge) whilst it is known to the outside world as **West Bagelton and District Synagogue**.

2. Bet HaTefillah

A centrally placed bimah is more common in orthodox synagogues. Reform and progressive communities are more likely to have the bimah directly in front of the ark.

3. Decorations

The 2nd commandment forbids the making of likenesses and any pictures or paintings on display, especially in the room used for prayer, are likely to be abstract. Many synagogues will have no pictures at all, but may have decoration.

4. Clues to the Uses of the Main Room

If the room is used exclusively for prayer, the seats may well be fixed (like pews in a church), in which case they may well have boxes underneath for members to store their tallitot (prayer shawls) and prayer books. Orthodox Jews will not carry even these things on the Sabbath, so leave them in their "box". If the room has multiple purposes the furniture is more likely to be easily movable and there may well be an extra curtain to cover the ark during times when the room is put to secular use.

5. Motto

Many synagogues display a religious motto on or near the ark. Two common mottos are:

Know before whom you stand.

Serve the lord with joy.

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6. & 7. Bet HaMidrash

How many children attend the cheder on a Sunday morning? There may well be adult education and/or discussion groups on Sundays or weekday evenings, a Torah study group before or after the Sabbath service, possibly with refreshments (eg some communities have regular Torah breakfasts.)

There may be a library of religious texts.

8. Bet HaKnesset

If there is a library, it may also contain secular books of Jewish interest.

There will probably be a kitchen (almost certainly vegetarian to avoid problems associated with maintaining kashrut (ie the dietary rules - particularly those associated with not mixing milk and meat products).

After every Sabbath morning service there will be kiddush (rhymes with bush), when the sharing of wine and bread is followed by time to socialise with fellow members of the community.

Many synagogues hold daytime clubs for various members of the community. Many communities support a women's club, often called The Ladies' Guild, and a club for the elderly. Some even maintain their own kindergartens or schools.

Most synagogues will have a hall or large room where celebrations following weddings and bar mitzvahs can take place.

Like many religious communities synagogues are largely self supporting and fundraising socials such as dances, concerts, quizzes and theatrical events are commonplace.

9. Synagogue Seating

In an orthodox synagogue, men and women always sit separately during services. There is often a screen or curtain between the men's side and the women's side or, more frequently an upstairs "ladies gallery". In progressive synagogues it is quite usual for men and women to sit together.